

PF Ag Person of the Year: Sen. Mike Johanns

by News Editor Chip Flory

Pro Farmer

Nebraska Republican Senator Mike Johanns accomplished something he couldn't claim during his time as USDA Secretary — your *Pro Farmer* editorial staff has selected him as our Ag Person of the Year.

The criteria for Ag Person of the Year is very straight forward: *Who has made the biggest difference, had the biggest impact or been the strongest advocate for farmers in the last year?* It's that last point that clinched it for Johanns. While many farm-state lawmakers — lawmakers that had consistently (until now) kept agriculture at the top of their priority list — seemed distracted by the political process in the last year, Johanns seemed to maintain a clear focus on that process and its potential impacts on ag.

Johanns' focus was clear in the last half of the year as Congress battled over climate-change and health-care legislation. He asked the kinds of questions we expect from a former White House Cabinet member.

We asked PF Washington consultant Jim Wiesemeyer to review what he's seen from Johanns in the last year:

"You would think that a former mayor, then governor, then Cabinet Secretary would find it tough to 'grow' into any new position. Not so with Johanns. As the junior senator from Nebraska, he has grown more than a gangly high school basketball center. And best yet, he hasn't thrown out acid-tongued remarks against the opposition party. Instead, he has offered solutions or warned of unintended consequences on a host of issues so important to agriculture.

"Johanns has also grown in his understanding of the interrelationship between the crops and livestock sectors, especially how policy must be balanced and equitable.

"As we look back, Johanns' experience in leading USDA under President George W. Bush served as fertile ground for his Senate post and has helped him earn his mark as a probing questioner. And it also shows he knows well the process of how the Executive branch works, and in some cases does not work. He also recently made clear his support for veteran career workers at USDA.

"Flexible. Equitable. A leader. A prober. A nice guy with grit. All the ingredients for a person of the year in any category."

Story of the year is kind of depressing!

There really wasn't much debate over what your editors would select as story of the year: The U.S. economy gets the nod. The U.S. economy's impacts on agriculture are far reaching... and will reach even further into the future. We've cursed and discussed the impacts many times... and we've warned of potential impacts ahead. Most important are the recovery programs that have ballooned the national deficit to the point that budget cuts are coming and farm program direct payments will be in the cross hairs.

There are several other stories that deserve an "hon-

orable mention," and USDA under the leadership of Secretary Tom Vilsack is very deserving. Vilsack's priority list at USDA is very different than any USDA Secretary we've ever covered. Up the list are tweaks to nutrition programs and farmers' markets; down the list are production agriculture and the livestock industry.

And speaking of production agriculture, the 2009 growing season gave the economic recession a run for its money in the race for story of the year. The problems started in the fall of 2008 — slow harvest and sky-high fertilizer prices put growers behind the 8-ball. A wet eastern-Belt planting season; cool and wet conditions until Aug. 25; three-weeks of near perfect weather to start September; frost damage; high-moisture harvest; grain dryers; light test weight; and a huge volume of corn and soybeans all contributed to one of the most unique growing season we've covered in 37 years of *Pro Farmer*.

Another production-ag story is the demand base for U.S. soybeans! After exports climbed to record levels on the back of Chinese demand in the 2008-09 marketing year, exports are surging again in 2009-10 and are easily on pace to set another new record.

And the equity drain in agriculture was an often-covered story on the pages of *Pro Farmer* in the last 12 months. Hog producers are trying to survive an equity drain more severe than seen in the late '90s; dairy producers aren't far behind. Cattle producers saw equity contract — just not at the same pace as in hogs and dairy. And the equity drain extended into the ethanol industry. VeraSun is out — Valero Renewable Energy is in.

And Washington was once again the source of many stories in 2009. Climate-change/cap-and-trade legislation potentially will have the biggest impact on agriculture in the year ahead — but only if current lawmakers decide to take on this issue in an election year!

Looking ahead —

Some big stories for 2010 are easy to predict... Climate-change legislation along with how U.S. agriculture might benefit will undoubtedly fill some pages in *Pro Farmer* in the year-ahead.

The final chapter on the 2009 corn crop and its impact on total supplies for 2009-10 has yet to be written. Any additional crop cuts could set the stage for a big-time acreage battle in 2010 as corn works to buy acres to assure an adequate supply in the year ahead.

And Vilsack is likely to be a story — his priority list runs counter to what we, and most producers, have come to expect from USDA.

Another likely big story is still a toss-up: *Higher interest rates sooner or double-digit inflation later?* If you think the Treasury Department, Federal Reserve and Obama Administration have been economically challenged in the past... wait until you see the next 12 months!

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